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# LISTENING TO VOICES THEIR

AN EXPLORATION OF FAITH JOURNEYS OF  
CANADIAN-BORN CHINESE CHRISTIANS



By

Enoch Wong, Jonathan Tam,  
Kwing Hung, Tommy Tsui,  
and Wes Wong

A report commissioned by CCCWE Canada

# Dedication

## Listening to Their Voices:

An Exploration of Faith Journeys of  
Canadian-Born Chinese Christians

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By

Enoch Wong, Jonathan Tam, Kwing Hung,  
Tommy Tsui, and Wes Wong

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A research report commissioned by CCCWE (Canada)

July 11, 2018

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To the intergenerational  
faith leaders: pastors  
and laity of the Chinese  
Canadian Immigrant  
Churches who have been  
faithfully toiling in the  
vineyard of the Lord for the  
sake of God's kingdom

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The idea of *Listening to Their Voices* (*LTTV*), formerly known as *To Whom Shall We Go?* (*TWSWG*), was germinated in 2013 when a group of concerned pastors and leaders in the Chinese Canadian Immigrant Churches (CCIC)<sup>1</sup> examined the findings of Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's (EFC) study, *Hemorrhaging Faith* (*HF*), on Canadian youth's religiosity. Though the findings of *HF* provided fresh insights in guiding the understanding of the issues at hand in addressing the youth's departure from their Christian roots, the study did not provide any ethnic marker on how immigrant parish communities, especially that of visible minorities, fared in Canada, having to adjudicate between the congregants' "back-home" culture with the "new-home" multicultural milieu. Nonetheless, *HF* piqued the pastors' interest in raising the following questions:

What would the journeys be for the Canadian-born Chinese Christians (CBCC)?<sup>2</sup> What shaped their faith and values when growing up in such a context? What potential social forces have they encountered that seem to influence many of them to jettison their Christian roots? How can the CCIC leaders address such an exodus of the local-born, a phenomenon that can no longer be characterized as "silent" (Wong, 2015)? What resources and strategies would be supportive of their desire for growth, autonomy, and maturation? Many have offered individual suggestions as to why and how this

phenomenon has been taking place. Some of these may well be "popular wisdom" and "pet hunch" (Francis & Richter, 2007, p. 1). Few, however, come forward with empirical studies that go beyond guesswork and speculation; fewer still have worked to incorporate viewpoints and sentiments of the cohort the church leaders have dearly cared about: the Canadian-born Chinese Christians. In responding to these curiosities, a request was made to EFC to utilize and modify *HF*'s instruments to initiate a similar study in CCIC targeting at the CBCC's faith journeys. Rick Hiemstra, Director of Research and Media Relations of EFC, together with The EFC's Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable project, graciously and generously provided his approval and support on behalf of the project team.

Needless to say, research into the faith journeys of CBCC requires assistance of CCIC stakeholders and participation of the local-born. Since this study employs a mixed-methodology of investigation – eSurvey and interviews – we want to thank the churches and gatekeepers who promoted the eSurvey and helped recruit interview participants in their communities. Our gratitude also goes to the eSurvey respondents who took the effort to complete the questionnaire online, and the interview participants for their willingness and candor in sharing the unfiltered experience of their hopes and dreams, joy and triumphs on the one hand; fear and agony, distress and frustration, disappointment and failures on the other about their faith journeys. It is because of the inspiration and lived experience of these local-born Chinese Canadian Christians that this report is named *Listening to Their Voices*, so as to capture both the spirit and the essence of their collective journey. Though their thoughts and feeling may have undoubtedly been missed or misinterpreted in some ways, it is hoped that they are represented well in this study.

1. Unless otherwise specified, Chinese Canadian Immigrant Churches are referenced and limited to Protestant denominations.
2. Unless otherwise specified, Canadian-born Chinese Christians are referenced and limited to Protestant denominations.

Francis and Richter (2007) lament that research of this kind has often remained “largely unfunded and … relegated to those twilight zones where hobbies and matters of real concern are allowed their proper place” (p. viii). Indeed, *LTTV* would have never taken off the ground without generous funding support. While the researchers of this study worked on this project on a voluntary basis, financial support was required to execute the survey, conduct the interviews, stage roundtable discussions, publish the report, and incur various sundry costs. Four major sources of funding have come to aid the project implementation. We wish to express our gratitude to The Christian & Missionary Alliance in Canada, Canadian Association of China Graduate School of Theology, Mr. & Mrs. D. Wan, and Mr. & Mrs. N. Lam/D. Tam, for their generosity. In addition, the Association of Christian Evangelical Ministries, the Association of North America Chinese Evangelical Free Churches, and the Chinese Mennonite Brethren Churches are key financial partners in this endeavor. Furthermore, the Association of Canadian Chinese Theological Education, the Centre for Leadership Studies at Canadian Chinese School of Theology, Carey Theological College, and the Hudson Taylor Centre for Chinese Ministries at Tyndale University College and Seminary are theological institution partners alongside our journey of research. Finally, gratitude goes to Chinese Coordination Center of World Evangelism (CCCOWE) Canada for commissioning this project. Without its strong championing and the nation-wide platform with the Chinese immigrant churches in Canada it provided, this project could not have taken place. In particular, Rev. Peter Mah, the former Executive Director of CCCOWE (Canada), has been a staunch proponent of the research and wise counselor along the way in opening doors and providing guidance. For his intergenerational devotion to the Chinese churches in Canada, the research team is grateful.

While Enoch Wong (Principal Researcher) conducted the research, completed the analysis, and wrote up the report, credits must go to the research team: Jonathan Tam, Kwing Hung, Tommy Tsui, and Wes Wong for contribution in coding and analysis of data and overall design and execution of the study. Warren Lai, and Tim Quek also provided general input for implementation of the eSurvey. In addition, part of the material in the introductory chapter is drawn from Wong (2015) and Wong (2016).

Finally, thanks must go to our almighty God whose unfailing love and unwavering faithfulness has guided the entire study. The team is grateful for the opportunity to make a small contribution to the Chinese Canadian Immigrant Churches and has been acutely aware of the fact that: “Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Ps 127:1a)<sup>3</sup>. Whether this study covers known terrains, confirms familiar issues, or perhaps offers new insights, the research team’s prayer is that it stimulates healthy discussions and inspires fruitful actions for CCIC to forge a new path forward with CBCC. May the LORD of the church show favor in what the team submits, for the sake of Christ’s church and God’s kingdom.

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3. Unless otherwise indicated, Biblical citation is taken from New International Version

A research initiative such as *Listening to Their Voices* that looks into the lived experience of faith journeys of CBCC cannot be pursued in a theoretical vacuum. The study has to be conducted in the meaningful context of a local phenomenon nested in a global setting. This chapter attempts to provide a thumbnail sketch of such a landscape by first providing an overview of CCIC and CBCC. Then a brief discussion of the faith disengagement phenomenon is introduced. It is followed by an overview of possible pathways of faith journeys of CBCC. The scope and purpose of the study is then identified and the chapter closes with an overview of the remainder of the report.

## **Chinese Canadian Immigrant Church and Canadian-born Chinese Christians**

### **Immigrant church and its functions**

In settling in a lesser-known setting of a “new home”, immigrants often struggle to find safety, a sense of meaning, and belonging while experiencing the metamorphosis of their social network and traditional values when they arrive in a destination country (Breton, 2012; Wong, 2015). Yet for newcomers and their offspring who were converted to Christianity either before or after their arrival in Canada, religious faith is not “merely one aspect of among many immigrant lives; it can encompass everything” (Connor, 2014, p. 4). Faith affects how they interact with non-immigrants, navigate the pathway of incorporation into the mainstream society, as well as shape their own future in that context (pp. 4-5). Thus, in addition to being a venue to maintain faith aspiration, worship, and proselytization, a religious institution can be a place that plays a vital role in the immigrants’ transplantation experience by facilitating them in adjusting to a new culture and language, overcoming cultural or ethnic barriers, fostering social networks, alleviating the stress in transitioning in the destination country, and helping them prepare to become full-fledged members of the host country (Botros, 2005; Breton, 2012; Connor, 2014; Wong, 2015). In addition, religious institutions are also sites and space where foreign settlers find constancy and continuity of their ethnicity in terms of language, tradition, cultural values, and social support (Botros, 2005; Breton, 2012; Hirschman, 2004; Ley, 2008). In this regard, the role of religion in the process of adaptation of the Asian immigrants in North America has been extensively analyzed (Chen, 2006; Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Kim & Hurh, 1993; Warner & Wittner, 1998; Yang, 1999). Researchers suggest that, apart from evangelization

efforts, these organizations carry out at least four functions for the adaptation of the new immigrants:

First, religious institutions function as a hub where a social bond is forged, network established, and material and psychological support offered (Abel, 2006; Breton, 2012; Chen, 2006; Ley, 2008; Ng, 2002). Second, immigrant churches can be a venue for preserving ethnic culture, values, and traditions (Bankston & Zhou, 1996; Min, 2010), comingling with co-ethnics to create social capital (Breton, 2012; Hirschman, 2004; Ley, 2008; Portes & Zhou, 1993), as well as a force for assimilation and change (Botros, 2005; Breton, 2012; Cao, 2005; Li, Q., 2000; Rah, 2009). Third, religious organizations provide a space where tradition, cultural rituals, languages, and ethnic identity are passed on to subsequent generations, who in turn negotiate and constitute identity of their own in that context (Connor, 2014; Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Warner, 1998). Finally, immigrant congregations can be institutions where male immigrants restore their social status with a leadership role they used to occupy in their countries of origin, mitigating the downward mobility in the host country (Kim, S., 2010; Min, 1992; Rah, 2009; Warner, 1998).

### **Chinese Canadian Immigrant Churches**

CCIC are no exception when it comes to realizing their roles. Deeply rooted in a history of nurturing faith and incorporation support to Chinese immigrants and their offspring for over a century, the institution traces its origin back to the 1858 gold rush (Yu, 2007), with the first-ever Christian Sunday service offered to the Chinese immigrants being exclusively held in the Chinese language in Victoria in 1885 (Con, H., Con, R. J., Johnson, Wickerberg, & Willmott, 1982; Wang, 2003). In the ensuing decades, the institutional vitality and advancement of CCIC relied principally on

the influx of Chinese immigrants and the organic growth of local-born generations, with the former being heavily thwarted by the exclusionary immigration policy. The obstacles are evidenced in the head tax levied in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1927 (Li, P. S., 1992; Roy, 1989; Tan & Roy, 1985; Ward, 1974), and the general anti-assimilation sentiment of mainstream Caucasian Canada (e.g., Chinese being labelled as the “Yellow Peril”) (Wang, 2006). In spite of these severe social and policy barriers, Chinese Christian communities continued to stand their ground; Table 1.1 illustrates the Chinese population, the Chinese Christians in Canada, and the corresponding local-born in CCIC from 1931 to 1961.

**Table 1.1: Chinese Population in Canada, Local-born, and Chinese Christians in Canada (Li, P. S., 1998, p. 67, table 5.2; Wang, 2006, pp. 79-80, 85, table 4.2 & 4.4)**

Year	Chinese in Canada	Chinese Christians in Canada	Local-born (%)
1931	46,519	8,354	12
1941	34,627	9,841	20
1951	32,528	16,231	31
1961	58,197	31,950	40

The Chinese population in Canada went through a disruptive transformation as a fundamental shift of immigration policy was introduced in 1967 in response to demographic and economic demands (Li, P. S., 1998). Designed to replace a long-held system aimed at privileging applicants based on the country of origin that

had exclusively favoured Europeans and their Caucasian heritage, the new immigration policy championed a universal point system that assessed, among other things, applicants’ “education and training . . . adaptability . . . occupational demand and skill, age . . . knowledge of French and English, and employment opportunities in the area of destination” (Marr, 1975, p. 197). The radical shift in policy cracked the immigration entrance wide open for the Chinese, both in diaspora and from China, to emigrate. The Chinese population in Canada skyrocketed to 118,815 by 1971, comparing with 58,197 in 1961 (Li, P. S., 1998, p. 89). Amongst the new Chinese immigrants were Christian students, ministers, and church leaders from their home countries who, upon arrival, started a mobilization movement such as “Chinese Christian Fellowships” on campuses (Matthews, 1997; Wang & Yang, 2006; Wong, 2015) as well as established ethnic congregations to meet the spiritual needs of the immigrants (Clements, 1997). Principally Cantonese-speaking, this group of immigrants constituted the primary actors and agents of the Chinese ethnic churches in Canada and provided the impetus for their rapid development since the 1970s (Clements, 1997; Mak, 1997). In the following decades, with the support of the arrival of additional religious leaders and spurred by a deep conviction of evangelicism, Chinese immigrant congregations grew from 30 in the 1950s to 230 in the 1990s, and to more than 350 in the 2000s (Guenther, 2008). It is speculated that there were over 400 such congregations across Canada in 2015 (Wong, 2015)

The Chinese diaspora can be misunderstood to be a homogeneous ethnic entity based on the similarity of physical appearance and their apparent congruence in customs, values, and culture. However, many distinctive subethnic groups indeed exist among the overseas Chinese that can be traced to their place of origins, dialects, and ancestral cultures, reflecting the divergent variations of regional and

clannish differences among them (Nagata, 2005; Salaff, 2005). It is further observed that in Canada, five ethnic sub-groups can be identified that correspond to their time of arrival, each forming a different but integral cohort within the larger CCIC communities. These five subethnic groups are: (1) Pre-1960s immigrants from Southern province of Guangdong with the Toyshan dialect, reflecting the Siyup (Four County) regions of Southern China; (2) Hong Kong immigrants who began to emigrate in 1970s; (3) Mainland Chinese who moved to Canada since 1980s; (4) Taiwanese who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s; and (5) the Chinese diaspora from South Asia who came in the 1960s and 1970s (Guenther, 2008; Lam, 2000; Li, P. S., 1998; Nagata, 2005; Wong, 2015).

### **Canadian-Born Chinese Christians**

In addition to the five subethnic first-generation immigrants, firmly situated in CCIC is the CBCC cohort, most of whom are the children of the first-generation believers who settled in at the immigrant churches. National Household Survey of Canada (2011) indicates that of the 1,324,700 who identified themselves in the Census 2011 to be of Chinese ancestry, 358,500, or 27 % (see Table 1.2), are local-born (i.e. non-immigrants), comprising the second and subsequent generations (Statistics Canada, 2011a). More than 90 % of the Chinese immigrants' children (see Table 1.3) were born after the 1967 open-door immigration policy, with 85% being Millennials – the generation who were born after 1980 in general, and by and large represents the proxy of the CBCC cohort this research is designed to investigate (Statistics Canada, 2011b). CBCC constitute about 54,000, including those who are affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations, and over 45,000 in this group are the second-generation. A majority of the local-born, over 39,000, declared affiliation with evangelical denominations (Statistics

Canada, 2014). This is not a surprising phenomenon given many of the Chinese mainline Protestant congregations in Canada share the evangelical markers as most of their priests or ministers tend to have been educated in evangelical-oriented seminaries at home or aboard.

**Table 1.2: Chinese Canadian and Chinese Canadian Evangelicals (Immigrants and Non-Immigrants) and Their Locations of Residence (Statistics Canada, 2014)**

	Total Chinese	Total Evangelical	Non-Immigrant	Non-Immigrant Evangelical	Immigrant	Immigrant Evangelical
<b>Canada</b>	<b>1,324,745</b>	<b>150,045</b>	<b>358,565</b>	<b>39,385</b>	<b>920,795</b>	<b>107,550</b>
Halifax	4,620	390	1,355	140	2,170	230
Quebec City	2,445	45	400	0	2,015	40
Montreal	74,375	3,935	19,240	800	52,115	3,025
Ottawa-Gatineau	37,135	3,375	12,050	1,065	23,790	2,270
Kingston	2,005	215	610	65	1,300	155
Toronto	531,635	61,820	134,455	14,765	383,260	46,045
Hamilton	11,545	1,120	3,505	205	7,280	825
Kitchener-Waterloo	11,800	1,275	3,225	375	7,570	895
London	7,405	415	2,100	115	4,655	295
Windsor	6,945	755	1,790	245	4,690	505
Winnipeg	15,165	1,260	4,425	510	8,985	705
Regina	3,710	625	1,025	300	2,065	310
Saskatoon	5,375	725	1,875	310	2,700	400
Calgary	75,465	9,620	25,260	3,315	48,740	6,170

Edmonton	51,675	6,635	17,195	2,155	31,850	4,290
Vancouver	411,475	51,040	102,965	12,555	297,120	37,330
Victoria	12,770	1,055	5,185	450	6,845	585

**Table 1.3: Second- and Third-Generations of Chinese Canadian and Chinese Canadian Evangelicals (Statistics Canada, 2014)**

Age	Second-Generation		Third-Generation	
	Chinese	Evangelical	Chinese	Evangelical
Total	316,915	34,945	37,200	3,995
<15	141,615	13,515	19,710	2,330
15-24	79,285	9,740	7,900	775
25-34	50,550	6,425	2,865	290
35-44	22,055	2,985	1,930	120
45-54	15,715	1,695	2,340	250
55-64	3,850	300	1,685	175
>65	3,855	286	940	60

Collectively referred to as the “new second generation,” CBCC, similar to their American counterparts, are capable of asserting autonomy and forging their identity (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Reitz & Somerville, 2004). In this regards, CBCC’s growing up experience is not unique in Canada. As children of the post-1967s’ so-called “new immigrants” (Breton, 2012), CBCC share a number of key characteristics with the broader cohort of the local-born children of Canadian visible minority immigrants in general (e.g., South Asian, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese) when it comes to shaping their faith identity. For example, the local-born of visible minorities

tend to refashion their parents’ religion in innovative ways so as to reinterpret it in the Canadian multicultural context (Ramji, 2008). To that end, their religiosity tends to exhibit the following traits (Beyer, 2013; 2014):

First, to the extent that this cohort practices religion according to their faith tradition, they value and place it in high regard. At the same time, religious diversity practiced by others is also respected (2013, pp. 55, 71). In addition, religion is treated as a “privatized” matter, not in the sense of being restricted to some “private sphere” but rather in the sense that its role is to give the lives of practitioners meaning, structure, and purpose, not to impose itself on everyone as some kind of authoritative system of belief and behaviour (2013, p. 71; 2014, p. 90). Finally, religious practice for this cohort is highly personalized in that they take responsibility for working out religious life for themselves, reflecting an individual choice they make in attributing significance and meaning to their own practices rather than merely following their parents’ faith tradition (2013, p. 56).

In addition to their faith expression, another key aspect of the CBCC’s growing-up process is related to how they negotiate their ethnic (i.e. Chinese) and national (i.e., Canadian) identity through the Canadian multicultural terrain. Apart from how the immigrant church functions as a venue to mediate and transmit faith and Chinese ethnic traditions, three additional markers can be identified that are perhaps unique in how the CBCC’s view of ethnicity is shaped (Wong, 2015):

First, the perception of the ascending prominence of China in the international arena has perhaps aroused interest among the second-and third-generations to be “re-Sinified,” (i.e., to become identified as Chinese), incentivizing them to align with their parents’

ethnicity (Wickberg, 2012, p. 140). Second, the rising trend of globalization has bridged both the cultural and the traveling gaps between the immigrants' host country and their home country. Aided by advancement of the Internet and social media, local-born can connect with the culture of their ancestral homeland through mediums such as digital public media at a low cost with relative ease. In this regard, the local-born tend to be more transnational in their outlook (Wong, 2015, pp. 64-67). Finally, as Ooka (2002) observes, one of the key determinants shaping Chinese Canadian youth's ethnic identity is the extent of the ethnic socialization in which the youth have come to engage. In other words, the structural environment in which the socialization occurs determines the level of retention of ethnic identity, for Chinese Canadian youth as well as their acculturation of into the broader society. Raised in CCIC, many CBCC are challenged to navigate their ethnic identity in the faith context, which may either strengthen their continuous alignment with the immigrant church institution or steer them away to worship elsewhere (Wong, 2015).

## Faith Disengagement of Youth and Emerging Young Adults: A Global Phenomenon

The phenomenon of younger generation disengaging from religion is not an exclusive Canadian occurrence. While some may argue that unbelief is not a severe phenomenon in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, or in the Islamic world (Sanchez de Toca, 2006), religious disenfranchisement of youth and emerging young adults has been evident over the last few decades in countries of the Global North with historically strong affiliation with Christian faith. In the North American context, for instance, the faith journeys of Millennials has been well discussed (Beyer & Ramji 2013; Dean, 2010; Kinnaman, 2011; Penner, Harder, Anderson, Desorcy, & Hiemstra, 2012b; Powell & Clark, 2011; Smith [with Longest], 2009; Smith [with Snell], 2009; Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith, Longest, Hill, & Christoffersen, 2014; Thiessen, 2015). This collective cohort tends to be much more pluralistic in its outlook, in most part due to influences of secularization that have been permeating North America and the Western world for decades (Baker & Smith, 2015; Breton, 2012; Thiessen, 2015; Zuckerman, 2014). These forces of secularization have exerted themselves in a way that has shaped the identity of the younger generation to be less religious and more tolerant. One of the profound effects secularization has exerted on the values and beliefs of Millennials is in the area of sexuality. Brown (2015) observes that in the Global North, a growing trend of liberalizing views on pre-marital sex and homosexuality in younger evangelicals is detected (p. 55), a trend corroborated by a recent study among British Christians in their attitudes of accepting same-sex relationships, which increased rapidly from 35 % in 2013 to 57 % in 2016 (British Social Attitudes, 2017). In addition, Millennials tend to carry a distaste for the traditional political landscape that has generally been embraced by the Christian right in the U.S. (Dillon,

2015). In addition, an anti-institution sentiment is palpably present among them, reflecting not merely a disposition toward religious institutions, but rather broadly against all forms of institutions: media, government, labor market, etc. (Pew Research Center, 2015c). As such, Millennials typically place a high degree of mistrust on leadership and authority specifically. Sexual scandals in the Catholic Church and political corruption are but examples that serve to fuel the distrust. As a result, Hout observes in an interview that “across all denominations, [there] is a gap emerging between politically liberal and moderate young people and leadership among conservative churches who are taking political positions on abortion, gay marriages and other social issues” (Masci, 2016). Many in this cohort who grew up in a religious setting have dislodged their institutional religious identity in favor of being spiritual “nones,” a term derived from those participants in the surveys and polling who claim that “their religious affiliation is precisely that: none”( Kenneson, 2015). Some in this group may maintain spirituality but claim no attachment to any religion (Ammerman, 2013; Mercadente, 2014). Other Millennials simply abandon any belief in God altogether (Baker & Smith, 2015; Brewster, 2014; Zuckerman, 2012).

Furthermore, in the U.S., the Pew Research Center (2015b) reports that the religious nones have jumped from 16% in 2007 to 23% in 2014, or from 36.6 million to 55.8 million in absolute numbers respectively. The portion of the nones indicating religion as not important in their lives rises from 21.0 million to 36.1 million during this period, representing an increase from 57% to 66% of the total number of religiously unaffiliated adults in the U.S. The trend continues when probed further about their religious practices such as prayer, attending religious services, and their belief in God, pointing to the direction of this cohort being increasingly secularized (pp. 3, 5, 6, 14, and 19). An earlier report by the same institution (Pew

Research Center, 2015a) sheds light from a different perspective, focusing on the generational difference of the total cohort of the nones. It suggests that with many religious groups in the U.S. aging over time, “the unaffiliated are comparatively young – and getting younger, on average” (p. 5). In addition, the report provides further details on the age bracket:

*As a rising cohort of highly unaffiliated Millennials reaches adulthood, the median age of unaffiliated adults has dropped to 36; down from 38 in 2007 and far lower than the general [adult] population’s median age of 46. By contrast, the median age of mainline Protestant adults in the new survey is 52 [up from 50 in 2007], and the median age of Catholic adults is 49 [up from 45 seven years earlier]. (pp. 5-6)*

Looking at the cohort from the perspective of evangelicals, Millennials represent 22% and 19% in the older (i.e., born from 1981 to 1989) and younger contingent (i.e., born from 1990 to 1996) respectively, comparing with the overall Protestant population of 38% and 36% in these categories. Yet the nones occupy 34% and 36% of the overall U.S. Millennials population respectively (Pew Research Center, 2015a, p. 11).

As astounding as the portion of the nones in the Millennials cohort is, so is its growth: it has risen from 25% to over 34% from 2007 to 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015a, p. 12). The alacrity of the exodus surprises even seasoned experts. Greg Smith of Pew Research Center, for example, remarks according to a CNN report: "We've known that the religiously unaffiliated has been growing for decades. But the pace at which they've continued to grow is really astounding" (Burke, 2015).

Turning to other regions of the globe, the phenomenon continues. In Australia, Mason (2010) observes: “The expectation of a decline of traditional religion among youth was strongly confirmed … with only a very small proportion of Australian youth were turning to … alternative spiritualties” (p. 56). Citing Brierley (2006) and Garnett, Grimley, Harris, Whyte, and Williams (2006), Day (2010) echoes that in Britain, “the current generation of teenagers and young adults … is less religious than previous generations” (p. 95). Basing upon an analysis of Teenage Religion and Values Survey in England and Wales, Robbins and Francis (2010) report that while 41% of the sampled youth (aged 13-17) indicate they believe in God, 49% of them never attend church or other venues of public worship (pp. 51-52). Similar trends and observations on youth religiosity are consistent with a general wider pattern of declining religious identification, affiliation, and practice in Euro-American countries (Day, 2010). In Singapore, the General Household Survey 2015 indicates that those identify themselves with no religious affiliation constitute 18.5% of the resident population, up from 17% in 2010. Of this group, about 65% are between age 15 and 44. Roughly 23% belong to the group ages between 15 and 24 and 22.4% between 25 and 34, compared with 14.6% among residents age 55 and above (Department of Statistics of Singapore, 2015, pp. 7, 24).

Similar phenomenon of decline in religious affiliation is reported in Korea, with 56% of population identifying themselves to have no association with religion in 2015, up from 47% in 2005. The decline is more pronounced in the group of age 20 to 29, a drop of 12.8% in religious affiliation (from 47.9% to 35.1%) was registered (Statistics Korea, 2016). Meanwhile, Gallup Korea (2015) finds that 31% of South Koreans in their 20s identify themselves as religious, down from 45% a decade earlier (p. 17). Similar phenomenon has been observed in surveys studying university Christian cohorts in Hong

Kong. Enrollment in higher education institutes corresponds to faith deflection; Hui, Lau, Lam, Cheung, and Lau (2015) conclude that “being a full-time student in the university is another factor of faith exit,” most likely due to their exposure to acquaintances (i.e., students and professors) of different worldviews, and not receiving support from faith community (p. 12). In China, religious ‘None’ are growing across generations, at least relative to traditional Chinese religions” although there are in general “the structural mobility parameters [that] suggest an intergenerational growth of Islam [& Christianity” (Hu & Leamaster, 2015, p. 79, 95).

Finally in Canada, census data indicate that religious nones rose from 4% to nearly 24% in four decades from 1971 to 2011 (Pew Research Center, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2011b). Recent research (Bibby, 2012; Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015; Thiessen, 2015) also identify a general trend of faith disaffiliation in Canadian youth and young adults, although this phenomenon appears to be more salient in non-evangelical denominations while evangelicals have enjoyed a level of stability in attendance (Bibby, 2012; Reimer & Wilkinson [with Penner], 2015). In particular, Penner, Harder, Anderson, Desorcy, and Hiemstra (2012a) note that only one in three in the young adults who attended church weekly as a child continue to do so in their adult years (p. 1).

In short, Millennials are less religiously inclined than previous generations in many regions around the globe, and this phenomenon is extended across the Protestant denominations both domestically and globally, forming a part of the context for this study to look into CBCC’s faith experience, a cohort pre-dominantly falling into the Millennials category as mentioned previously.

## Pathways for Faith Journeys of Canadian-Born Chinese Christians

The faith journeys of CBCC in the context of CCIC is a multi-layered and multi-directional lived experience. One can problematize this collective journeying reality, seen in four different pathways, with their associated religious types – each with its own identity-defining characteristics. First, the “Stay-On” cohort represents those who grew up in and continue to worship at CCIC. The second group is “Move-On,” referring to those who are still active in faith engagement but have chosen to leave CCIC in favour of participation in non-Chinese churches. The third one is “Drop-Out,” representing those who, for a variety of reasons, have left CCIC and seldom, if ever, attend any religious services. Finally, members of the “Boomerang” contingent are those who left CCIC, be they Drop-Out or Move-On, but have chosen to return to CCIC after a period of time for a variety of reasons. While these four groups represent generically the total scope for examining the faith journey of CBCC, this study focuses on the experience with the Stay-On and Drop-Out cohorts. A brief discussion of the background for each group will be provided in the next section.

### Stay-On

Despite the faith deflection phenomenon that has been occurring in multiple geographical regions around the globe as discussed earlier, many researchers continue to focus on religious practitioners who register a strong adherence to their faith. For instance, Sherkat’s analysis (2014) of 40 years of General Social Survey (GSS) data concludes that religious identification in the United States remains “robust and salient”, indicating “80% of Americans still identify with a religious tradition or denomination,” painting a

more sanguine picture than the Pew Research Centre’s findings (2015b, p. 4). Reimer and Wilkinson (2015) suggest that teens in evangelical churches in Canada who can relate to a heightened sense of God’s presence tend to be stronger in their adherence to their faith and faith community (pp. 180-181). Penner et al (2012b) reference higher participation in religious activities such as camp and short-term missions that help sensitize experiences with God as a key positive factor in creating stickiness of teens’ faith (pp. 47-51). In addition, Smith (with Longest, 2009) highlights parents, intergenerational influences, deep religious experience, and religious devotional disciplines as the adhesive factors for teens’ engagement with the church and faith (p. 224-229). Powell and Clark (2011) points out the positive impact of mentoring adults in the faith of emerging young adults (p. 100). Along the same vein, Dean (2010) echoes the critically important role of mentors in creating robust faith adhesion in the teens and young adults (p. 121). On the other hand, Francis & Richter (2007) and Wong (2015) point to the relationship that teens and young adults establish in faith communities as a key influential factor for them to remain engaged in their faith. In addition, Wong (2015) pinpoints visionary church leadership (or lack thereof) as one of the deciding factors that sways CBCC to stay or leave CCIC (pp. 544-557).

Finally, perhaps the most critical factor in shaping the religiosity of teens and emerging young adults and their engagement with faith communities is their parents and their practice of – and attitude toward – faith adherence. As will be examined in details in the next chapter, a cornucopia of research points to a variety of ways that parents – father or mother, both or either –positively or negatively impact the faith formation of their children (Bengtson, 2013; Cornwall, 1987, 1989; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008; Hunsberger & Brown, 1984; King, Furrow & Roth, 2002; Myers 1996; Nelson,

2014; Pearce & Denton, 2011; Smith [with Snell], 2009; Voas & Storm, 2012; Winston, 2006; Zuckerman, 2012).

## Move-On

For the church-leavers in North America or elsewhere, many have come to be characterized as “disengaged”; “disaffiliated”; “dropping out”; “exiting”; or “distancing” (Francis & Richter, 2007, p. 4). Yet as mentioned earlier, once CBCC left CCIC, there are two pathways for further pursuit: (1) they can choose to stop attending any church or (2) move on to worshipping at churches other than CCIC. For the latter cohort, the reasons for departure may not have been due to a lack of engagement with faith. Many in this group continue to value their religious belief and identity but desire to express them in settings other than the Chinese immigrant churches. Factors such as ethnicity, church leadership and culture, and faith conviction have been identified as precipitating factors for many Asian Americans to seek a more meaningful engagement with communities that exhibit clarity of vision and distinct purposes, as well as ministerial orientations more in line with their own faith expression (Alumkal, 2003, Jeung, 2005; Kim, J. C., 2003; Kim, S., 2010; Kim, S. & Kim, R. 2012). Wong (2015) reverberates many of these influences and highlights relationality, ethnic proclivity and identity, stagnation of growth, internecine conflict, and dysfunctional leadership at CCIC as key determinants for CBCC exiting CCIC in favour of congregating at other churches. As CBCC move on to seek out alternative communities to continue their faith journeys, four distinctive options present themselves: (1) local-born Chinese evangelical churches, (2) Asian evangelical churches, (3) multi-ethnic churches, and (4) Caucasian congregations (Wong, 2015).

## Drop-Out

While the Move-On cohort continues to engage their faith in communities other than CCIC, there is a group of former CBCC who have severed their relationship with CCIC and no longer attend any church service or declare any institutional affiliation. Some within this group make that intentional decision to leave the church and institutionalized religion because they share the same “push” factors of the Move-On believers about the immigrant churches: frustration, humiliation, judgment, and broken relationship.

Many researchers have surfaced a different typology to characterize this group of “unchurched” individuals. For instance, Packard and Hope (2015) portray them as the “Dones”: “They are tired and fed up with the church” and are “done” with it (p. 14). The church as an institution, in essence, is the barrier keeping them from God and they claim that their faith journeys is better traversed outside the boundary of organized religion (p. 16). Similarly, Kinnaman (2011) conceptualizes three “broad ways of being lost” (i.e., not engaging in institutionalized religious practices) (p. 25). Nomads are those who step away from church engagement yet still think of themselves as believers, while Prodigals have lost their faith and no longer register themselves as Christians. Finally, Exiles are still interested in their faith but feel stuck between the broader culture and the Church. Baker and Smith (2015), on the other hand, assert that as an overarching designation, “nones” is appropriate to refer to those who are “religiously non-affiliated – individuals who claim no affiliation with an organized religion” (p. 15). Yet from the perspective of belief, they can be further categorized into the following: First, “atheists,” those “who do not believe theistic claims”; and second, “agnostics,” those “who assert that theistic claims are unverifiable in principle” (p. 15). Reflecting the trend of “believing and not belonging”, the third

group is the “non-affiliated believers,” those who “claim no religious affiliation but maintain some form of theistic belief” (p. 16). Finally, from the perspective of religious practices, there exists a group of individuals who “claim religious affiliation and theistic belief, but rarely [if ever] attend religious service or pray privately” (p. 17), a cohort that Fuller (2001) refers to as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) (pp. 2-5).

Taking a step further, Roof (1993) offers a starker but perhaps simplistic clarification on the distinction between being religious and being spiritual. For him, “to be religious conveys an institutional connotation: to attend worship services, to say Mass, to light Hanukkah candles.” Conversely, “to be spiritual” is “more personal and empowering and has to do with the deepest motivations of life” (pp.76-77). On the other hand, Kenneson (2015) argues that the nones are those who could be SBNR but draw “moral boundaries between themselves and those who embrace a religiosity that SBNRs regard as intellectually, theologically, or morally deficient” (p. 9). Finally, postulating yet from a set of different lenses, Mercadante (2014) suggests that SBNR hold a collective view that essentially rejects traditional conceptions of God (especially those contained within Christianity), instead altering them to fit their own framework of spirituality. Abandoning a God who is “stereotyped as a judgmental overseer”, this cohort replaces it with “the idea of a sacred force which is impersonal and benevolent” (p. 230). Mercadante further indicates that SBNR she studies disavow the following spiritual world views:

- An exclusivism that rejects all religions but one's own;
- A wrathful and/or interventionist God;
- A static and permanent afterlife of glorious heaven and tortuous hell;

An oppressively authoritarian religious tradition;  
A non-experiential repressive religious community; and  
A view of humans as “born bad.” (p. 230)

The variety of typology suggested by research points to the complexity of defining the faith journeys of this cohort. Different shades of characterizations exist as Kinnaman (2011) aptly points out: the faith journeys of this cohort “are not monochromatic or one-size-fits-all” (p. 26).

### Boomerang

The last cohort involves those who left CCIC for a period of time, either moving on to attend non-immigrant churches or having disassociated themselves from religious affiliation, and have now returned to their faith or religious attendance. Dubbed as the “boomerangs” (i.e., those who left immigrant churches and congregate somewhere else) (Lee, 2014) or “returnees” (i.e., those who left institutionalized religion all together) (Francis & Richter, 2007), these local-born decide to reconnect with Christian faith either through their ethnic root or start afresh in non-immigrant church venues. Sherkat (2014) underscores two principal reasons for the boomerangs to return to faith or re-engage with faith communities: (1) old age tends to lead to higher social participation such as religious involvement due to stability in social ties and flexibility in work and familial obligation; (2) families of “procreation often leads people to return to religious participation and identification” (p. 90). In addition, Francis & Richter observe that “in broad terms, the people most likely to return are those whose church-leaving was associated with life transitions and life changes, and alternative lives and alternative meanings” (pp. 302-303). On

the other hand, those who are least likely to return are broadly speaking “those whose church-leaving was associated with matters of belief and unbelief; growing up and changing; incompatible lifestyles, costs and benefits, disillusionment with the church, problems with relevance and problems with conservatism” (p. 303)

Thiessen (2015) further identifies a set of possible turn-around factors as motivation for reengagement that are suggested by research participants who have disengaged from involvement with a religious group. First, discovering a positive experience of community (such as connectedness and deeper or newer friendship) with a religious group is registered. Second, a change of family stages occurs, such as “getting married, having children, finding a religious group with enjoyable programming for children, or children moving out” (p. 151). Thirdly, discovering religious groups are less exclusive. Fourth, encountering more relevant teaching with applicable lessons, more dynamic religious leaders with higher competency in communication, and contemporary worship have emerged. Fifth, evidence of putting religious beliefs into meaningful humanitarian practices that define the identity of the community is salient. Sixth, closer proximity of the institution and finally, a less-busy lifestyle can also be a factor. However, Thiessen cautions that whether reengagement with religious groups is sustainable for these participants, even when these factors are found to be true, remains to be seen (pp. 150-153).

## Scope and purpose of study

The overview of the four cohorts points to a viable framework for further investigation upon the CBCC population with respect to their faith journeys. However, a comprehensive study of the Move-On cohort was completed recently by Wong (2015); problematizing the Boomerang cohort is challenging methodologically at best, as it is difficult to qualify whether a participant in the research is one of Boomerang or not (e.g., church hoppers and attendance hiatus are two examples that complicate this boundary). While deserving exclusive attention in the future, findings on Boomerang would most likely emerge when studying the Stay-On cohort given the natural ebbs and flows of individual religious affiliation. Therefore, the scope of *LTTV* targets the Stay-On and the Drop-Out groups of CBCC, with the purpose of exploring the shaping influences on their faith identity and commitment as well as disengagement of religiosity in the context of CCIC. With the juxtaposition of disparate groups leading to contrasting findings, this study highlights themes and ideas that may otherwise be neglected if we merely look at a group individually, as the cross-case and within-case studies approach indicates (Yin, 2014).

In completing this study, a qualitative-driven mixed method of survey and interview is adopted to maintain consistency with the approach of *Hemorrhaging Faith*, with a modified set of eSurvey questionnaire and interview questions tailored to address CBCC in the CCIC context (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). A detailed discussion on research methodology can be found in Appendix A.

## **Overview of the Report**

The following chapter focuses on a literature review of the determinants affecting the faith journeys of youth and emerging young adults, positively and negatively. The review examines salient factors such as intergenerational influences, community practices, mentoring experiences, religious disengagement, and apostasy.

Readers who are less interested in the literature review can proceed to Chapter 3, where the attention of the report is turned to the identification of four different religious types in the context of CBCC's faith journeys (i.e., Highly Engaged and Less Affiliated of the Stay-On group; Spiritual "None" and "Dones" and Agnostics & the Atheists of the Drop-Out cohort) together with a discussion on the findings of ten emerging themes across these four different religious types. The report concludes in Chapter 4 with a set of directional action recommendations to address the findings of the study. Together with the findings, these recommendations are designed to promote a healthy reflection in CCIC on the shaping influences of CBCC and foster a contextual dialogue among intergenerational leaders to address the findings. To aid such a reflection and dialogue, a set of suggested discussion questions for each directional action recommendation is provided in Appendix F.